
A Queer Arab Identity?

In this presentation, I discuss the notion of Queer Arab, and examine the ideological gesture it performs. What does Queer Arab achieve as identity formation? Whom does it refer to, if it is anything but self-referential?

My initial project was to discuss Queer Arab and the possibility of militantism in the Middle East, rather than mobilize my theoretical apparatus, constantly deferring me as distant organic intellectual. I can write about Queer Arab in so far as I imagine myself as a western academic. In other words, it is precisely my position of academic that allows me to imagine or even entertain such notion as Queer Arab identity. To those who expect this paper to perform a synthesis, I feel obliged to warn you that this paper's contention, at best, is to generate questions and expose contradictions, its own, among others.

For all political purposes, I believe in constructing a gay and lesbian identity in the Arab world. Visibility is a key factor in that process. People should see that [gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered](#) are not the uncanny deviance of human sexuality, and slowly realize that gay and lesbian-ness ought to be socially integrated. Conceptualizing a queer identity is necessary for political and civil rights activism. For this reason alone am I invested in talking about gay and lesbian identities and their conditions of possibility. The danger, however, arises when we take for granted the constructedness of such identity, and relegate it to an essence, an inherent characteristic, tantamount to a certain style of life, dressing, talking, and identifying especially. Gay and lesbian are a socio-political construction with a specific history and history of struggle and political achievements. However, a political mobilization necessitates a linguistic mobilization as well, i.e., a rethinking of homosexuality the way it occurs in Arabic language.

Haboub(a)

Let's talk about a word that signifies our sexuality, and grabs its complexity with a mere combination of letters. As of this moment of enunciation, we hope to exist as self-defined entities and autonomous subjects, responsible for that ideological gesture we bring upon ourselves. Ideally, we seek a word that detaches itself from the stigma with which our homosexual practices had to struggle for so long. The term "ideally" is quite problematic. When we, as lesbian and gay Arabs refer to each others as Haboub(a) ("sweety" in Arabic), we ought to realize that this term, with all the "positive" implications of its usage, posits itself in relation to Tobji, Shaz, Souhaki-ya, Louty (Faggot and the like). It posits itself as lack, lack of those pejorative connotations against which it differentially establishes itself as meaningful utterance.

Haboub is no longer effeminate or doomed to perish like Lout's people. Haboub is like "Black is Beautiful" in the 70's it is gay. Such term, however, risks falling prey to its own ideological lure. How so? We are debating haboub as a potential signifier for Gay and Lesbian Arabs. But is gay and lesbian Arabs unproblematic to begin with? Our usage of gay Arabs, even though for all heuristic and temporary purposes, is an appellation that is to be held culturally accountable just like haboub(a). Gay and Arab, lesbian and Arab, it almost suggests these net searches wherein

we type several words, and wait for the computer to combine them under a certain rubric-to produce a synthesis. The computer process, its synthesis, can be an interesting analogy, but is definitely an alarming one as well. The machine will proceed by generating the entries, i.e., the possible convergences and common grounds between gay and Arab. But what if, when we type in gay and lesbian Arabs, we obtain something along the lines of "under the Saudi law, homosexuality is a crime punishable by either death, flogging" or what have you? How is this output significant in terms of the way we conduct our search? Is it the case that the computer is predisposed to read only certain kinds of approximation and association in that very specific vein, just like Islam and terrorism for instance? This potential output signifies that the computer and the cultural context in which it arises on the one hand, and our particular stand point as Arab intellectuals on the other, may be quite antithetical. Therefore, when we discuss gay and lesbian Arabs, we try to bring together two concepts, two ideologies, overlooking their contextual and linguistic differences.

Gay in a middle eastern context does not refer to what the latter refers to in a western one. The sexual practice alone is not sufficient to appropriate the word, and expect it to be harmonious with its new cultural surrounding. In other words, how is it possible for the word to rethink its occurrence within that specific paradigm? At this stage, yet another major question arises: representation.

From our particular intellectual, political, and even geographical stand point, are we entitled to represent Arab queers or provide them with a word to adopt unproblematically? How can we avoid the risk of remaining at the level of the detached diasporic intelligentsia which will repatriate in a huge container, an appellation, accompanied by an extensive set of sexual and identity politics to go with a normative package, that is? This is not to say, however, that producing a "positive" word to refer to gay in Arabic is a fruitless task; the concerns I raise constitute the task's self-reflexive matrix, nothing more. In order to rephrase the net-search analogy mentioned earlier, I call attention to a personal frustration. Every time I think and write about gay Arabs, I find myself reiterating critical discourses on Queerness from the 1960's, 70's. Every time I imagine myself to be finally producing original thought and analysis, I find it thought of and analysed previously in western queer contexts. Why so? I'm faced with this wall of reiteration given that my approach still seems not to question enough "queer" as concept, social practice, and identity in the first place. When I think of Queer Arab, I have the western notion of queer in mind, despite my attempts to expose such tension, as I tried to do earlier. I find myself unable to problematize queerness in the Arab context at any fundamental level.

Therefore, I make the same observations made in the 60's and 70's on queers in America. My entrapment in the western paradigm reduces my intellectual enterprise to a correspondence theory, in constant struggle with that historical gap. But in what other ways can I problematize Queer Arabs? How can I theorize such phenomena especially that a Queer Arab theory (or theories) is important in so far as it might generate a counter-discourse on sexuality and power in the Middle East. I want to reemphasize the Realpolitik character of my task. I strongly envisage a queer militancy in the Arab world, one that brings about civil rights to homosexuals in the region, without exclusively having recourse to human rights organizations. In few years down the road, the United Nations might pressure certain countries to acknowledge homosexual rights, but what would that gesture signify? That rights are only possible under the rubric of a gay and lesbian western identities, universalized in terms of human rights and identity formation through NGO's or other globalizing institutions an imported doctrine?

Before I further interrogate queer identity as a possibility at the political level in the Middle East, I need to interrogate identity as such. How does the notion of citizenship inflect a queer identity? Is a queer identity at all possible as socio-political construct in Arab societies to begin with? Can we talk about Arab "society" as unified body of social and religious formations? Is Queer Arab a romanticization in so far as it attempts to recapture an Arab homosexual essence la Abu-Firass al-Hamadani? In other words, is Queer Arab a fundamentalist discourse, a radical discourse, a return to homosexuality's roots in an Arab context of a Greek model scenerio? Can we think of Queer Arab as being a pan-Arabist discourse by precisely disidentifying from a hegemonic sexual practice, i.e., do we identify as Arabs by precisely inhabiting that site of sexual others, and does that site reflect and construct our Arabness? Does it imagine it as ideal origin? A counter-discourse on sexuality produced in the Diaspora reiterates and re-produces a dominant political discourse on Arab unity. The sense of Queer Arab's community does not lie in what they have inherently in common as Arab identified homosexuals, but rather in the ways in which a particular level of exclusion constitutes homosexuality as privileged for the construction of identity.

Queer Arabs, and by coming out as such, exclude themselves to form that ideological community of Arabs, and construct Arabs as community based on ideology. Queer Arab identity is viable in so far as it exploits that moment of self-incurred exclusion. Queer Arabs form a community of rejects, and yet they form a community that transcends ethnic, religious and other social determinisms. We can hence come together as Arabs by choice rather than belonging and indoctrination as was the case in the 50's and 60's with the rise of Socialism in the Arab world. It is precisely our choice to come out and engage in homosexual practices, that we achieve the coherence of such notion as Arab, henceforth rendered dynamic in its very conceptualization of community. Arab was always defined along overdetermined lines of geography, religion, language, and ethnicity, especially. Queer Arab challenges such determinisms; it reappropriates and salvages Arab as an ideological gesture, produced at a moment of consent, a homosexual consent between two adult individuals who decide to come together. Queer Arab overdetermines Arab identity at the site of desire, it desires to see this identity coming. Queer imagines and constructs Arab as binding effect, and not vice versa. Queer practices nourish and sustain Arab as ideal positing. It is precisely our sexual practice that make Arabs of us. Queer and Arab are complementary. Without being an identity itself, queerness, so to say, consolidates our sense of Arab identity. Queerness has the form of identity, it conditions it. Our sexuality makes of us Arabs to each others, and constitutes a site of overdeterminacy that allows us to imagine ourselves as Arab identified individuals. I become Arab to you at that site of coming together.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek argues that in monarchies, individuals imagine themselves as subjects-to-one-other given their respective positions vis--vis the king whom they overdetermine as a centralised power. At surface level, Queer Arab presents itself as a counter-discourse, a site of dissent from a dominant ideology. However, Queer Arab performatively reinscribes and affirms such ideology internally. The radical other of socio-political discourse in the Middle East, becomes always already is the discourse's utter interior, its binding effect that which allows the discourse to operate in the first place. Queer Arab spears that discourse the pathological positing of identity in terms of ethnicity, religion, and the like. Foucault's productive hypothesis characterizes Power as repressing such notion as homosexual, but it also produces homosexuality and on it a multiplicity of discourses that eludes homosexuality as object of repression. Discursive practices produce and not merely signify their symbolic objects. A discourse on queer sexuality constructs the latter as other to that imagined object of repression.

Queer Arab constructs homosexuality so as to de-essentialise it. Power projects its holistic fantasy, its fantasy of negating its fundamental contradiction. Power's superficial/conscious fantasy is a repressive hypothesis which represents power as repressing all obvious dissidence to maintain its centrality and incontestability.

Power, however, operates at a more fundamental and unconscious level; it does not maintain itself through repression as an end in itself, but through repression in so far as the latter will proliferate discourses on identity, identities that will imagine themselves as such vis a vis a centralized power structure. In the Queer Arab's context, power's immediate reaction is to outcast such notion, and does so quite successfully, *priori*. This repression of homosexuality as practice allows us to entertain a Queer Arab identity, a notion that answers and returns power's demand for stability and unity.

Oppression and a queer identity are symbiotic. They operate as each others' fantasies. That said, I still need to address the political and ethical implications of such analysis. Is repression justified in so far as it maintains a queer identity, imagined in the Diaspora? At this stage, I appeal to the constructedness of a queer identity as strategic political practice, a bargaining power, as viable as its oppression. Power, or, and to stick to Foucault's differentiation, the micro-physics of power, lies in its illusion, in its possibility of creating that illusion of omnipotence, an illusion that we construct and legitimize from our respective subject positions. Zizek discusses Kafka's depiction of bureaucracy, a notion that becomes overdetermined in terms of its oppressive modes due to the ways in which subjects relate to themselves in relation to it. They construct it as absolute. We construct our own entrapment in the network, its our masochistic fantasies that we feed, and of which we feed. I might be accused of idealizing Queer Arab, but how else can I proceed, how can I not idealize that which is only an idea, a hypothesis, a coming. I can only idealize, and approximate through a mimetic gesture the material reflection of Queer Arab identity. This is not say, however, that I have discussed a mere condition of possibility, but rather a condition that bears the possibility of subversion in the ways in which it redefines political discourses as such.

There is no Queer Arab identity, but there is no auto-sufficient/autarctic "Arab" either. Arab is constantly demanding queerness to accomplish its *relve* (sublation) in the dialectics of identity. Arab is a queer in-itself.

The Politics of Naming: A Queer Arab Identity?

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